



ALBONIA

# ALBONIA

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# PROLOGUE

## *In the sullen dormitory*

He spat and he spluttered and walked up and down the ranks of bunks. He swore and coughed. His head down and forward, a glower on his brow, he was dark and sour and ill-lit by light from his lantern burning yellow. We called him long-knife, and cowered in our beds, waiting for him to pass. Because: if he turned; if he turned at your bunk; you didn't want to know, and hoped he picked the one above, below, just not you.

## *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*

In the red-brick methodist church on Underpool Road, set up on where the organ used to be. This is where the money went. It ended up in a folded pipe; we couldn't get it out. There was a dead rat up there. Whether it had crawled up there and died, or died because it was up there, we don't know, we're not a party to rat plans. Cecil's not up the pipe.

## *Underwired*

As I sit on the rock. It's not a rock, did I say rock? No, it's a planetoid in the Oort Cloud. So far away from you the sun's just another star to me. And I sit here with my metal alien face ticking under the human skin. Waiting for you to come. And you'll come this way out into the dark. I chose my home well; I considered all your avenues, and this is the one you'll use.

So when your red-painted space rocket, with big fins and a point, comes silent through my realm you'll get a real surprise. I've waited for half a billion years. I can wait a few years more.

### *Multi-faceted kingdom of doom*

The highest kingdom is that, in splendour that, like rain diamonds, shines within the clouds. Which shines down through the perpendicular arches, through wet grey stone onto tessellated prisms, Penrose-tiled galleries of the cathedral. Malcolm, prince of the outer kingdom, dark and certainly irritable, sits on his throne, his virile sword neglected by his side (and blood of enemies vanquished still not cleaned off). He contemplates at the vaulted roof where the artist (now headless in an unmarked hole) had started to paint his family's struggle and triumph. Not good, thinks Malcolm, not finished, not good. Shame that oil-stained arse was not up to the task.

There's stone dragons in the marble corners, with glowering eyes and red breath full of new meat.

*imagine a world of people—*

—or just one, three thousand miles away

*Walking to the prison, salt mountain orange lit at night*

In this winter night the trees were sentries either side of the road, charcoal drawn on dark-blue paper of the sky washed over from one horizon to the other.

There was a bunch of crows arranged around the lowest branches of one tree (someone knows better than me the name of the tree, and what the collective noun for crows is). They called out in the way they have (like they have smoked cigarettes from birth), saying something I would not understand because I am not a crow, or "never more, fuck you". I walked past on the road and the crows called after me. It was too dark to see them clearly (black rags fanned out), only to imagine them looking down their dirty beaks at me.

The prison was orange lit with sodium lamps on tall steel poles above the moire-patterned chain link fence (because there are two layers and they parallax as you walk by). I walked past the prison officers' houses and the kennels where they kept the stinky hunting dogs, past the council depot and there was the great road-salt mountain. I ducked through a torn gap in the fence, and crouched-ran across the floodlit concrete into the shadow of the salt.

I ran up the shallow side of the salt escarpment and leapt off the steep, and landed half way down in a welter of purple translucent rock salt - which went up my trouser legs and wedged in my boots coldly. I lay for a moment and looked at the night sky, seeing only the brightest stars against the orange floodlights' fog.

Beyond the council depot was the shed show-field, a garden centre that specialised in wooden huts and green and white plastic sacks of compost or coal. The road running the length of the garden centre's extent was marked out with white-painted stones stolen from the disused iron ore quarry up the road. So I knew in the darkness to the right of me was an acre of creosoted sheds, as I counted off the white stones.



## *Warp form infection*

*My books got burned outside the town hall  
The things I said got unsaid  
The ideas I had were crap, and identified as shit  
But shit sticks, and is translated through common ports  
Borne on plague ships calling in to bright harbours, and  
fucking them up  
This infection gets out, and puts wires in your arms, bursting  
in your head*

# ALBONIA

Being mostly a journal I have kept of my travels,  
There are oceans I have seen that are just folds in my  
                        bedspread,  
Others are vast, deep and clear to the drowning floor.

I

*Just nipped back to get my keys*

Before off on the holiday (long time coming, short time going).

Anyway, before I bugger off. I found this from Bertrand Russell:

*Fear of public opinion, like every other form of fear, is oppressive and stunts growth. It is difficult to achieve any kind of greatness while a fear of this kind remains strong, and it is impossible to acquire that freedom of spirit in which true happiness consists, for it is essential to happiness that our way of living should spring from our own deep impulses and not from the accidental tastes and desires of those who happen to be our neighbours, or even our relations*

That's good.

*Hello World, which has intertube connections*

Blogging from Albonia<sup>1</sup>, first stop on the grand tour of my holiday. This off my Nokia 3310 phone. Very difficult. This has taken about 20 minutes to write. So not much from here, then. Everywhere in Albonia is nearly underwater because of the inclement weather. Wading not walking. Later.

*Travelling through the planes of Albonia*

On a yak.

We (me and Fusel: my guide and card-carrying Comintern apparatchik) are on the road across the grain bowl of Albonia. The bowl is flat as a flat thing and stretches out on every side to distant hills poking up a long way away.

It's wet too. Wet in the sky, wet on the road, and wet on my yak. What's that thing? 'You can see so far you can see your dog run away for three days.' Well maybe two days here, with that dog measure— or maybe a yak metric in these parts.

For a couple of hours now we've seen the smoke of the town we're heading for (there's some big fuck-off brown coal power station there apparently, fed by strip mines we can't see) and the smoke goes up like a solid tower of global warming, a right angle of pollution dividing one half sky from the other half sky. Fusel says it's a portent of the glorious something or other.

I'm not allowed to photograph it.

*Fusel tells me...*

The town's called Pizpot, and was the furthest north Alexander got on his world tour in 333BC<sup>2</sup>.

It appears he minced up here after sorting out the Gordian Knot (pre-christian Rubik's cube) and took a short holiday before going back south to die of dysentery. There's a spa in the centre of Pizpot that has Alexander's footprint preserved in plaster as a centrepiece. It's exactly a foot long - and is where we get that measure from. By the same token, a yard is a measure of three Greeks standing really close together.

*On a plane tomorrow*

Fusel<sup>3</sup> has arranged that we travel the next leg of the tour by twin-prop Leitmotif. This fills me with fear.

The Leitmotif, a flying toilet manufactured in thousands in the dogend of the 40s during the Glorious Reconstruction:

when south Albonia was blasted, depopulated, and choked with rusting martial ironmongery and therefore useless; so the north got 5 year planned. Industrialised, strip-mined, stuck full of groaning machinery, and so made in the image of the south.

Heavy rivetted Leitmotifs, engines sugar-glued to sagging wings, were spat out of the mills one after the other (or sometimes four at once), painted with big red stars, pimped with glassene gun turrets and launched into the air to patrol the skies in ugly, coughing bulldog circles.

Well, I'm travelling in one of those tomorrow.

There is a bonus - Fusel insists that the yaks (Steve and Boris) have to come with us. He wasn't expecting argument because he booked the yaks' flight the same time he booked ours. Fusel says they'll have to travel first class. Because, it was all so last-minute, and the last two tickets for the cargo hold had gone. I was OK with that 'til I found out what part of the plane me and Fusel are to travel in

### *Near the Knuckle now*

Well the yak (who I've named Steve) is really wearing my arse out now, but we're just passing the Knuckle. It's this big black volcanic glass rock that's off to one side of the road, a mile off, and still huge, glinting in the evening slanting sunshine.

It's called the Knuckle<sup>4</sup> because it looks like this big carpometacarpal joint pushed up out of the stony ground round there. Like a giant is trying to punch her way out of the geology. Nothing grows there (and you have to say that with a mystery whisper) because, hey! it's fucking rock, there's no soil there. Fusel glowers at this and sucks on his pipe, which I think is full of ketamine, because he's that fucked up with his big-ass moustache.

I'm a happy smiling tourist with a big camera, a hunk of technology I can't use, even here. There's a super-secret rocket base behind the Knuckle, and occasionally you see the contrail of an X-plane full of volunteer about to explode. Still and all, I can hear the whiny call of plain warblers arguing about politics in the reeds of a stagnant pond which smells of diesel just a couple of close Greeks away.

Very.

### *In town*

We got here at last, night drawing in, and I'm now blogging this through the wonders of T9 predictive text, standing on a cobbled road in the outskirts of the old quarter.

This is Valve Street, and there are electronics shops each side, blinking and flashing from yellow-lit interiors. The shops have no front walls, they're all door, with a token territorial gesture of flaking metal-framed office desks across the front. These invariably piled high with winking and humming gimcrackery.

The shop I'm in front of has windows on the second story painted out red with white text, there's a light on behind, making signage. The table of this one is spread with oily cogs, a spaghetti of wiring and humps of things that have the air (or ozone) of Tesla machines. I would buy one, except I don't know what constitutes 'one' in the pile — they all share tangled wires and bits of fatherboard (red, not blue), copper-soldered together. If I picked that one up, I think I'd trawl a dozen others dangling by.

The shopkeeper is a five year old boy, and like all his peers in this country looks like an angry angel, with big mad eyes and brows thick in a V. I smile, and the boy scowls more. Fusel takes me by the elbow, and leads me away. He mutters something to the boy and the boy smiles and nods.

Steve (yak) has just shit on the cobbles, and it's my job to clean it up. So I'll phone in later, after I've dealt with the yak shit.

### *Anyway, tonight*

We found a tavern, light spilling on the street from the double doors, oak and strapped with brass, where there was a welcome.

After drinking the local cooking beer with Fusel and various men (the women, in layers of cotton and silk, don't come out nightwards), where my shining baldness was subject of much conversation (these guys have big black bushes of hair, or fifteen feet of dusty turban), we've retired to the back room for guests. The electric has gone off — it's past midnight, and the grid is pumping up to the arctic circle and the miners there; no light for us — so we're lantern-lit in this nook. I'll take a minute to describe this place. The floor is stone flagged up to a burning fire where two big dogs lie. The tables are round and thick and the chairs low and upholstered in stretched leather. The ceiling is in shadow. Heads of dead things, imperfectly stuffed, are hung on the walls. There's a short bar with candles on, and golden glints from metal there. And there's this big glass fronted budweiser fridge in the corner, by the door, with one light occasionally flickering behind the stacked bottles inside.

Fusel— slumped in a chair by the fire, has his chin on his chest, so I see his fat moustache and pipe— silhouetted: his eyes backlit orange. He's staring into some distance that ends around a mile away and underground. He's stopped talking to the old man, equally piped, equally silhouetted, sitting with his dogs.

I'm further from the fire, and have that thing where my front is too hot, and my back cold. But I have a beer, and am trying to smoke a pipe (a black curved stove) that I can't keep alight.

Somebody should tell a story right now.

*Mint based breakfast barbecue*



We're out (Fusel and me) on the terracotta tiled roof garden this fine morning (cold mist crystal dawn in the cotton of our over-shirts) and looking out over the purple rooftops, across the incised plains to the low hills bent beyond the horizon's curve.

I am smoking a cardboard cigarette (a nicotine contraption made of silk thread and rice paper), and I have a thick black coffee in a tiny cup.

Fusel's fluting breath into his turbine pipe and holding a plastic disposable lighter, flicked on and off, over the bowl — fighting the early morning dampness, mist and fog, to get it lit. We are standing apart, and not exactly facing (because of drunken information going each way the night before, we both know more about each other than we want to). But I hope there's still a friendship there, and it's just a hangover headache in the way. Plus, last night, I fired off into the East Midlands vernacular, and don't think he understood me.

There's an airship just lifting off out of the field two miles downwind. The morning blimp, dull-seamed with explosive gas, about to rise with engines whirring.

I have mint, meat and cheese to eat for breakfast laid out on paper on the table, but I'm still slightly drunk, and haven't an appetite for anything other than asking Fusel what exactly he meant last night when he said that thing. Today we go to Svaltwoond.

### *Just got off the plane*

And am feeling multi-banged up by cargo hold.

Me and Fusel (Fusel and I) spent the last ten hours in the dark oil stinking belly of this cold war flying shit-house, with straw bales, chickens and a lashed tower of Samsung microwaves for company. Fusel had his travelling set of chess out. Tiny milled steel or aluminium pawns, knights and bishops; brass or copper rooks, kings and queens;

depending on the side you're on. Sharp pin feet stuck in, holes in, alternating oak or padouk squares.

He had this Eastern European belief he's better chess-wise than any pasty westerner like me (Gymnasium of the Mind) but I have this aptitude, and I gave him a good run for his money (we bet on the outcome of our second after a cagey first).

I lost in the end; end-game pawn manoeuvres, in which I get lost.

But he's not so dismissive now: he's younger than me, but he had that weary patronising, and sometimes sanctimonious, way of suffering my enthusiasm; and although that eyeward skyward thing he does (which irritates the fuck out of me) is still sometimes going on, he listens a bit more now.

And all because I sacrificed a bishop for a winning attack on his fianchetto.

### *Zeppelin graveyard*

One thing I didn't tell you was the time, in the bulldog aeroflot, looking out of the glassene bow observation hole, when I saw the dead balloon tracts.

We were cycling up over the mountain hump of the Urinals and there was this plateau, full with ice stretched over the hard grey rock, where due to a lucky confluence of orphan thermals and dry winds the abandoned blimps of inter-war transports gather. They built those things to last, filled them with argon and wrapped them with thick, greased leather, so once left to their own devices they floated up the betrayed winds, and ended up jostling in the depression, five points north of anywhere we care about.

Dark hulks lifting on errant gales, sometimes grazing the ice-locked valleys, sometimes above the peaks. A hazard to commercial airborne shipping nonetheless. Surviving 70

years lonely later, bullet-riddled by attempts to down them, but still floating in the night time depths.

### *Fusel tells a story*

About his grandfather, who was a fighter pilot. Seems he was flying low over the Urinals on his way back from patrol late one night. And out of the moon glow at 12 o'clock a fucker bi-plane shot the crap out of his tail.

So he ditched it in an oxbow lake in the bitter hills homewards (no parachute, and water landing much preferred to rock scratching). Anyway, he wakes up in the grey dim dawn wrapped in felt and lard, a walking stick in his hand and a fucked off wolf a yard away.

The story goes on and involves homburg hats and more lard. And he goes on to become this word-renowned artist. So Fusel tells me.

### *We've just crossed the border*

After six hours in the customs hut, we're finally in Svaltwoond<sup>5</sup>; a hard land of glaciers and concrete bunker towns inside the radius of the Arctic circle, and my, is it cold. Fusel's still with me as my official liaison — Albonia and Svaltwoond are politically related<sup>6</sup> — and we've picked up a Svalti guide too: a severe woman named Bêbedos Dedos (Fusel calls her '*Baby*', and it winds her up). She's short, with short white blonde hair and a short temper. She's also quite good looking in a terse way. Her accent is as thick as two short planks; her words come out like she's spitting pips into a wind tunnel. I like her and Fusel doesn't.

### *Albonian party music*

Watching the news, listening to Fusel play his harmonium whilst Bêbedos (not his wife, that's Fusel's little joke) plinky-

plonks on her sitdown guitarra<sup>7</sup>. Here:

*On the land train.*

We're taking the land train from the border town to Shithaus (dark grey government town of Svaltroond). There's no trains or motorways: the spring thaws and unstable geometry of the glaciers don't allow the luxury of rail or road; so instead we're travelling in an articulated convoy of wide cabins on wheels, pulled by a converted tank. I say 'converted', but I mean that the main gun has been plugged with lead. Bêbe tells us that the tanks pulling the land trains didn't used to be disarmed this way, only since the abortive counter-revolution in the late sixties, when one went straight up the main drag in Shithaus and blew the head off the Slotpin memorial.

*A little history:*

Slotpin was this hunch-backed yak herder from the plains of Leng who led the resistance against the Imperial occupation. Post war, he went on to become Secretary of the party (mainly by killing everybody else in the central committee). The party you're not invited to, and the one that ruled Svaltroond with an 'iron elbow'<sup>8</sup> for 60 years until the Year of Free Opinion.

That's when Clospin<sup>9</sup>, gave a speech where he said, "You know, respect to our departed and glorious leader, hero who led us out from under the Empire's ankle, but, well, he was a bit of shit you know." (paraphrasing). Of course, once that was out the inevitable decadence of gangster capitalism was not far behind — that and Macdonalds.

Still don't have free speech, mind. Like I can't say 'Fuck Slotpin and all his works to behold,' mainly because I can't speak the language, but also because Fusel tells me I probably don't want to spend the next several weekends tied to a bed-frame connected to a car battery, and

weekdays in a windowless cell with my own shit for company. Think he may have a point.

*Back to the land train:*

The cabin we're in is surprisingly comfortable— it's dark out, yak-wool covered shutters are bolted across the windows, and there's candles in glass jars epoxied to the walls. The high-backed seats are ranked across the wide cabin, facing each other in slightly inward curves, and you get a sense of intimacy in the swaying shadows. Because we're on fat rubber tyres and hydraulic suspension the ride is smooth, if a little undulating. There's soft music on the tannoy which is sometimes interspersed with bursts of static status reports from the tank captain up front. Other than that there's the rumble of the engine, the wind complaining outside, and the murmur of conversation. There's a pot-bellied burner at one end, tended by a stooped old woman, who also serves vodka from a big black bottle or spiced tea from a big black kettle. We're going to be on this train for about nine hours, Bêbe tells me, so we may as well get some sleep. Good night.

### *A salty aside on the Svalti diet*

It's shit. Mainly herrings, onions and yak in a sauce that is mostly salty water. The old woman came round with a bucket and a ladle whilst we waited. I got a chipped enamel plate, and she heaped some crap out of her bucket in there. Bêbe and Fusel, both with the same shit steaming in plates, take spoons from the breast pockets of their tunics.

Fusel asks me why I don't eat, and I tell him because I don't have a spoon and can I use his when he's finished? He goes a bit red in the face, and says, 'No! Do you think I am a homosexual?'

Bêbe says I can use hers. And she winks as she says it.

### *Another aside on the diet of the Svalts*

I don't think the Svalts are pale and unwell because the sun up here is shallow, and most of the year hidden behind the Southwall glacier. No, it's because they eat transparent food: see-through fish and onion skins. Other than the purple red of yak sausage (where they get their anger from) there's no colour in their diet, and therefore no blood in them.

### *Paperwork in Gunhome*

Yes, it's a nine hour journey, but we have stops on the way (Bêbe forgot to mention), so I was woken up by a soldier pushing a wedge of paper the thickness of my hand into my face. Fusel shouted something from the other side of the cabin, where he had been arguing with the old woman about short measure, and the soldier stopped trying to shove documentation up my nose.

We're stopped in the bunker town Gunhome. Gunhome is underground, dug into the walls of the valley and only evidenced by the shot towers looming in sentinel rows on the ridge above.

The town is an armoury depot, sitting on top of a lead mine and supplying the local forces with ammunition— lead shot mostly. Which is why I didn't complain too loudly at the soldier, who has this double-barrelled automatic shotgun slung low on his shoulder (that there is such a thing as an automatic shotgun was a surprise to me).

We're changing tanks. The previous goes back to the border town, and we get two bigger ones (similarly butt-plugged) and six more carriages, three full of lead ingots. The soldier wants my camera, and the documentation is to sign for it (in red ink). So I sign it, and I ask Bêbe when I'll get it back (I'm assuming there's some secret shit I can't photograph here), but she says, no, I'm not getting it back, it's an import form. I'm kind of used to this now - I've 'sold' quite a lot of my

stuff for peanuts to Albonian security this last week. So I ask her how much money I'll get for 'importing' it. No again, the import tax means I owe the soldier money ('Surely the government?', 'No, the soldier,'). Bollocks.

*Where Bêbe says something she shouldn't*

We're still waiting at Gunhome, and we're not allowed off the train. The soldier, now standing at the door, mimed this restriction very effectively using his gun as a prop. He told us we're waiting for passengers, then he said something to Bêbe in Svaltish. So we went back to our seats. I thought it was just me, the westerner, but he wouldn't let any of the other passengers off either. That caused a bit of a stink, one of them (probably a party member) got all pompous and started shouting at the soldier. Didn't work, the soldier just poked him hard in the belly with his gun and told him to sit down— I'm guessing that's what he said, the little guy sat down pretty quick anyway.

Since then Bêbe's been looking sick, and has been drinking vodka (each sip with a little grimace). Says the soldier said something to her that she's got to think about. Something about an abandoned monastery up ahead and one of the passengers we're waiting for. Fusel says that all the monasteries are abandoned, and there's a lot of them up here, so we're bound to go past at least one of them. Bêbe says the army shouldn't have cleared them out during the purges, that they were the only thing between us and Leng. Fusel snaps something in Albonian, and then they start arguing in Albonian (Fusel can't speak Svaltish). This stops when Bêbe, looking wild, crosses herself and shouts something in Fusel's face. This gets the soldier's attention and he hitches his gun round. He gives us a warning look. Fusel grabs Bêbe by the arm, pulls her close and hisses something in her ear.

I quickly interrupt to ask what she said that made the soldier prick up. Fusel says, 'Something she shouldn't have,' and pushes her away, hard. She hits her elbow on the arm of the chair as she goes back. She gives Fusel a look like she could drill holes in his head with her eyes. Fusel's now turned in his seat, so he doesn't notice. She's rubbing her elbow, and suddenly she starts crying, but in an angry 'I don't want to fucking cry' way. She's gritting her teeth to keep quiet, so Fusel, or the soldier, won't hear.

I can't deal with this, and I put my hand out to her. They're sitting next to each other, and I'm facing, so I have to lean across and it's a bit awkward. She looks up at me, and there's an imploring look for a second. Then she looks away. So I'm left hanging there with my hand stretched out in front, and my two guides glowering in opposite directions.

The soldier, who has watched all of this, snorts, and mimes taking a photograph (fucking street performer that one). Then I see the moment of realisation hit him as he remembers he's got my camera. Now it's my turn to look away. What a tableau: me, embarrassed, Bêbe sobbing angrily, Fusel sulking. Make a great picture. One the soldier snaps just now.

As they say on the postcards: *Wish you were here!*

*This is not fair*

It's very quiet. I think something's sinking in and neither Fusel and Bêbe can tell me what the something is now.

The passenger we were waiting for came. A short fat man in a brown uniform, he's got ginger whiskers and smells of stale tobacco and fish. He's sitting next to me reading a hand-written journal, sometimes he mutters something as he turns a page, and gives me a sly sideways glance to see if I've noticed. Fusel's staring straight at me and Bêbe can't look up. Neither of them seem to want to catch the eye of my neighbour.



I'm getting this backward— it's just that, with him sitting there, uncomfortably close, and Fusel and Bêbe acting so spooked by his presence, I can't think of anything else.

There was a thing that happened when he came. We'd been waiting for about an hour, mostly in silence except for the rustle of another traveller shifting in their seat, or the occasional bitten back sob from Bêbe, followed by Fusel either sucking his lips or huffing his moustache. There was a tap from outside. You'd have thought it was a gun going off the way it made the soldier jump— he'd been leaning against the door smirking at everyone, and if he saw me looking he'd snap his finger and thumb in front of his eye and wink (because he's got my camera).

The door opened and in came ginger-whiskers and two other soldiers. Our soldier regained his composure momentarily and, with a sidelong grin me-wards, made to leave. Not so, soldier number one pushed a big oily bag into the arms of our man. Our man looked at ginger. Ginger smiled and said something that translates as 'you stay'.

And that's when I realised that 'our man', the smirking camera thief, is actually 'our *boy*'. He went white as a sheet. Soldier number two barked out some order, and our boy, who I could now see was barely out of his teens, took a deep breath, stood a little straighter, turned and walked stiff up to me.

'You ok, give me camera,' he said, and rummaged in the bag, 'I give you good one.' And he pulled out a pistol and pushed it in my hand.

'You soldier now,' he said.

### *Gun lottery*

Our soldier, whose name (Mocz) I find out later, when it's too late to make a difference, took the bag round to the other passengers. Bêbe first: she held out her hand, but Mocz said, 'no, you lucky dip.' This in English, so for my benefit. Bêbe,

with a pissed-off look, put her hand in the bag and pulled out a nasty looking poky penis of a gun. If I knew about guns I'd say it was a Luger, but I don't so I won't.

Fusel got a blunt little revolver, and then Mocz was off round the other passengers, who were variously timid or defiant when blindly selecting.

I said to Fusel that I didn't know how to use a gun. It's hot in my hand, and I don't know whether the safety is on or off, or whether it's got a safety. Fusel took a moment, clicking through the chambers of his revolver, and said,

'You learn quick, friend, you're a soldier now.'

Thanks a fucking bunch, boy-soldier (Mocz) has already let me in on that promotion. Then Ginger came over and said, in a perfect English accent, 'May I sit here? It is a chair that's open?' I looked up, surprised, my mouth open, gun in hand, and said yes, that's ok, the chair is open.

### *Questions for old friends*

Funny how the ice and non-movement of the train brings this introspection on.

That sound, by the way, is engineers digging out the lead plugs from the gun barrels of our towing tanks, so they can shoot. See how that fills me with confidence.

Once that's done, we're off.

### *We're on our way*

By the clanking of the tank-tracks up ahead and the hissing of the rubber tyres underneath, I can tell we're moving.

Strangely, now we're on our way, the mood has lifted a little. It was the waiting.

The old woman is doing the rounds with her big black bottle, and she's stoked the stove, so it's warm, and the candles have been replaced. There's conversation, and comparing of guns. Mocz is looking less white, and has regained some of

his bravado, giving me a conspiratorial wink now and then, whilst helping the prettier passengers with the ins and outs of bullets. Ginger has stopped reading his little book and is now looking around with bright-eyed interest. He turns to me, and I can smell his rotten teeth as he smiles and asks, 'You Mercan?'

I say no, I'm from Blankland, and please, could you tell me what's going on?

'This is bad weather,' he says.

I agree that's it's pretty grim, and I tell him I know it's winter, and that I wasn't expecting much else. His smile gets bigger,

'No, friend, I say it's bad whether we go, or stay.'

Oh, a fucking pun; in Blanklandic, too. I try a smile back (fail), and ask him what's going on. I hold up my pistol, I ask him why we've been given guns.

'Comfort blanket, you know, like *Linus? Peanuts?*'

I tell him that Linus was the one with the piano, and that I don't know the name of the one with the blanket.

Fusel leans across and taps Ginger on the knee (an expression on his face I don't immediately recognise, then I realise it's respect).

'You excuse my friend, he doesn't mean to lead with his nose.' Hey! Fusel, you just called me your friend, and not in that dismissive, dad way. Ginger says something quietly in Albonian, and Fusel nods, looks at me sidelong, and sits back. Ginger looks across the cabin and snaps his middle finger on the palm of his hand at Mocz, and says,

'Boy, tell the Mensat to come and give vodkas for our foreign friends.' I catch a brief glower of annoyance from Fusel — not happy being told he's as foreign as me, I imagine — but it's gone quick, before Ginger looks back. Mocz nods furiously, eager to please, and shouts at the old woman (a Mensat, apparently) to come over. Bêbe, who has been quiet until now, and has been sat with her knees up and as far

away from Ginger as she can, perks up at this and holds out her glass as the old woman approaches.

'Not for you, sergeant,' says Ginger, 'you need to keep transparent head today.' Bêbe looks like she's been slapped in the face; I'm really not liking this Ginger fucker.

### *Went for a piss*

On the road train the convenience is primitive. Out the door behind the stove there's a cupboard with a hole in the floor. Through which hole you can see an axle grinding loudly. This gives me something to aim at.

Having finished, and not happy about the freezing wind I turn to go (having been).

Bêbe comes right in there, banging my nose on the door as she pushes her way in, heeling the door shut behind her. There's barely enough room for the both of us, and, well, I'm not fully zipped up yet. I have one hand fumbling with my flies, the other on my nose, and I'm all too aware of how close she is, right up against me.

'You fuck!' she says, and I'm insulted until she slips her hands down, and then I get the picture. Not romantic.

### *Bloody nose*

Spent, and trying not to think, I'm holding Bêbe close in an arctic shitter. I'm asking what's this about. And she's not answering, holding me, little in my arms. I just fucked you I point out, you owe me (and I know that's crap, so I don't need telling). She looks up at me and says, 'We are dead already, we are sacrifice.'

### *Fumbled exit*

Bêbe, in a forlorn attempt at misdirection waited for a moment before coming out of the piss cupboard after me, and is now engaging Mocz in stilted (looking my way too much) conversation.

### *Everything about you, except not your bones*

That's what they eat.

This is the cryptic shit Ginger says to me when I get back to my seat. This irritates me. Tell me what the fuck you're on about, I say, momentarily confident because I'm standing and Ginger is sitting. Fusel nearly sucks his moustache into his oesophagus when I say this — he grabs me and pulls me down into the chair next to him. Ginger looks at me with raised (ginger) eyebrows.

'I think you are heading yourself too far,' he says. And I notice that Fusel has his arm across me, and at first I think he's trying to stop me getting up to punch the little shit, but then I realise he's protecting me when he says, 'He doesn't know, he is not yours to waste.'

## *Ginger tells a story*

'So I tell him so he knows, then I can waste him?' asks Ginger. Fusel says nothing. Bêbe has finished pretending to be interested in talking to Mocz, so she's back to us, and appears discomfited that she has to sit next to Ginger now, as Fusel's got me in her seat. I go to get up, but Fusel's still barring me. I make a face for Bêbe and she sits.

'Welcome back, sergeant,' says Ginger with a hyena grin, 'I think you help our foreigner guest with aim?'

Now I do want to hit the little fucker, and try to get up again, but Fusel is expecting it, drops his arm quick and grips me just above the knee with some nerve trick, that stiffens me from hip to head, and makes me shut my mouth hard. And squeak. Which is very cool.

Ginger snorts appreciatively. He shouts to Mocz,

'Boy, more vodkas,' making that finger palm snap. Mocz quickly commandeers three shots from the Mensat's latest patrons (none for Bêbe) and hurries over. I'm just about recovered from whatever the fuck it was Fusel did to me as he takes our vodkas from Mocz. As he passes me mine, he whispers 'Sorry'. This makes me want to cry. This is all too much: guns, fucking in a toilet, and Fusel coming over like a frightened dad; I can't handle it.

'Well, now we are comfortable, and sitting friend's together, I tell you what the shit is going on,' says Ginger.

So in the rumbling clanking quiet that has just descended Ginger, sensing an audience, gets a puff in his chest and starts his story. The story of dead monks on the hill, with mutter of translating

'During glorious years of rebuilding Svält pride and land after war, when our great army clears the churches from catholic vermin race traitors. We take every mountain redoubt from the hook claw of these priest oppressors. We burn them out, and shoot them as they run out the big doors. Even old men run fast from flame, but bullet overtake

them in even race!' Ginger laughs as he says 'race'. Nobody else laughs, but I'm aware that everyone in the cabin is hanging on his words.

He's speaking in Blanklandic, and although most Svalts can understand that (glorious hero education system) I can hear low-muttered translations going on.

'Our reach is long but we take our time to find everyone, and it is twenty years after war before we get to Leng.' I notice Bêbe surreptitiously cross herself when she hears this word.

'This is regiment of blooded heroes, and tanks, and exploding horses.' I learn much, much later that he's referring to a favourite trick of the Svalt army: strap short-fused dynamite to a horse and bolt it into villages where counter-revolutionaries might be, but usually weren't.

'It is same deal, we think, as many time before,' and for a moment he stops, a moment of memory, and I realise he was there. 'But it is not like before, where we blast and burn church and houses, and shoot them dead everyone.

'This is big place, stand black above the valley, with many walls and towers. The weather is close in and dirty. And many guns, some big, they have themselves.

'We fight for 2 days on the rock below in the shitting blizzard, and we never see faces of the bastards killing us. Then weather is better and we call the bombers in and drop gas on them. This quietens them to death.

'We go up, go through doors hanging off, and walls in splinters. We find one enemy, high in gatehouse, dead with blue face, and tongue sticking out - is good gas.

'And you know what? He is shitting old man Imperial.' He leans back and necks the last of his vodka. 'You know what, friends? This is where we go now. We go to see dead monks on the hill. This name you all know, in our Svalti speech of heroes,' and he looks around the cabin, skewering each in turn, raises his glass, and says, 'Gethsemet.'

Silence of the damned. Only the clank and rumble, until Bêbe starts crying again.



*You're still being cryptic*

I hesitate to say, but say anyway, mainly to break the breathless silence. Bêbe (who I now love) looks at me, with eyes glistening wet in the candlelight, sniffs and says,

'I told you what, I told you what this is. What we are.'

So I ask, why don't we shoot this fuck, and fuck off home?

Ginger says nothing, he's looking enormously self-satisfied right now, even though I've got my gun up and am staring at him through the question.

'Because,' says Fusel wearily, putting his hand in front of the muzzle, 'we all have families, and they,' he looks steadily at Ginger, 'know where we live.'

*Fucking drunk and lairy right now*

East Midlands hinterland (land behind the well known seaward port of Scarborough) vernacular coming out now. One too (three) many vodkas in my face. And I want to fuck Ginger right up (rehearsing bullet-through-the-neck scenarios mentally). Little, nasty, fish-stinking fuck that he is. Fusel won't let me though, and has taken my pistol. Also Mocz is standing close by with his big brass automatic shotgun. In addition, Ginger is asleep.

I look at Bêbe, I want to be telepathic right now, and let her know it will be OK (the fuck that I know), but also that I want to go somewhere else.

Fuck it, I think, 'Bêbedos, can you come with me, I want to talk,' I say, loud, but not very clear (because I am drunk).

'Yes,' she says, and I am undone, and fall asleep soon after.

*Got here, Fusel away*

Can't get my head round this, eyes too full, heart too empty. The wind is whipping us below Gethsemet. And I'm on my knees, hugging him close.



## *I woke up*

With a splitting headache and Ginger shouting. The train had stopped and it was time to go. Ginger had this big smile on his face, standing at the open door with Mocz and the old woman.

'One last drink, before we go! Come on!' and he pointed at the party man. 'You first comrade, come here and get a shining courage, come with your gun and drink up.' The party man hesitated, and looked around for someone, but we all looked down. Mocz took a step forward, and the man fumbled up out of his seat, gun shaking in his hand. He said something pleading in Svalti, but this just made Ginger snigger, and shake his head:

'You come here, you drink, you be fine,' and he gestured at the Mensat who filled a glass from her back bottle. She held it out with averted eyes and a little mutter. Fair play to the party man, he took the glass, raised it and said:

'Spless hin.' Bêbe translated in a whisper to me: 'Fuck you.' Ginger sniggered again and wiped his hand across his mouth.

'Come on comrade, you make sacrifice now, your family is grateful for now until next time.' Party man downed the vodka and gave the glass back to old woman, straightened and walked out the door into the dark cold outside.

And one by one we went, each time Ginger inviting, smiling, and showing us the door with an exaggerated wave. Whilst Mocz stood close, tall beside him, with finger on trigger.

We were last, and I was expecting him to say something as I took a brimming glass from the Mensat, but he didn't, and I think I was more insulted by that. Fusel was behind me and refused the drink, and Ginger asked:

'You Albonians can't stomach smell of vodka?' and then he turned to Bêbe and said, 'These foreign shitters, ay Sergeant? Perhaps you take me for aim piss later, and I show you real cock?'

I spat out vodka, and tried to push past Fusel, thinking *punch-Ginger-in-the-head-and-get-shot-by-Mocz*, but he staggered into Ginger, blocking my clumsy attempt, and, seemingly to regain balance, threw an arm out (knocking Mocz's shotgun to one side and tangling him in the strap) and scraped his boot down Ginger's shin straight down onto his foot.

Ginger's eyes went big and wet, and he bit his lip hard.

'You did that on purposely,' he hissed. Fusel made a big deal about steadying himself and said, 'I have no stomach for vodka, is all, comrade. I am sorry.'

Mocz was red in the face, trying to extricate his gun. Fusel turned and, with one quick movement, unhitched the harness' buckle. The gun fell free.

'There you are boy. Keep harness on left shoulder, with strap under pocket, you be fine.'

### *We stood outside*

In the banked up winter there beside the stopped and silent road train, in the hollow of this glacier track valley. The engineers were up ahead uncoupling the two unplugged tanks. A bunch of soldiers, wearing long felt tunics and with faces smeared with lard against the cold, were stood around, silent, bored and smoking those thin little cotton-tied cigarettes.

We were huddled together, not wanting to stray too far from the candle cast light out of the cabin door. Party man, Mocz's pretty bullet girls, another bunch of blurred face passengers who I don't remember now (all dead now), Bêbe, Fusel and me. Ginger was in earnest conversation up ahead with the soldiers' boss (Captain? Corporal? Manager? I'm not a

student of military hierarchy), with Mocz in lick-spittle attendance, fawning for the big soldiers with the big guns, who ignored him.

Mainly waiting then, in the cold which was not as cold as it should be (it was winter dark blue leavings) and not as dark as it should be; there was a vomit orange glow beyond, its origin obscured by the dark bulk of the train.

I began to realise quite how ineffective our guns were ('Comfort blankets') when I checked out the soldiers' ordnance: big fuck-off-wide muzzled rocket launchers; or multi-barrelled perambulating gatling guns on rubber-wheeled trolleys, tended by two each of these lard-faced, felt-wrapped men.

### *Began to lose it on the way up*

We had guns (shitty little pistols) and we got some martial comfort from that, but still we were herded up the glass, cutting incline beyond the train. With blank eyed soldiers and Ginger, with sarcastic encouragement, behind us, we climbed. And now we could see where we were going, because it was outlined in that vomit orange glow that seeps out from the towers of Gethsemet.

### *The back of his head burst open*

And I looked round a moment later, and saw Ginger smiling, just lowering his gun.

We were half way up, and not going too quick because it was steep, and we really didn't want to get there ahead.

Fusel was beside me, my arm in his, and also holding Bêbe by the hand (I wanted to do that, I thought), helping us both. For a moment he stopped and pulled me back, and pulled Bêbe forward, so we were three close together, and me, taller than both, was looking down.

He looked at Bêbe, then looked me in the eye, took a breath and opened his mouth to say something or other, and I heard a parsimonious little crack behind us and blood exploded from his mouth and he hiccupped once and I felt his weight suddenly and Bêbe caught him close and his eyes went glassy as he slumped and pulled us both to the ground.

*I don't remember much past that*

Until we got to the blasted gatehouse, then there's too much to remember. Between Fusel's death and the gatehouse it's just a freeze-frame montage: Mocz pulling me up, ashamed, and murmuring something in Svaltish. Ginger kicking Fusel's corpse and saying:

'Albonian got good death in second, we get bad death, take an hour or two.' Ginger still limping, and me, with Fusel's blood all over me, getting some minor, buried comfort from this. Bêbe holding my hand, but not able to look at me. The soldiers behind us, grim but breathing then, as we climb past rotting machinery and broken masonry.

*At the gatehouse*

The gatehouse was big and built into a split in the natural wall that guarded Gethsemet's towers, orange lit, looming behind it.

After what looked like an argument with the captain, who with his soldiers was holding back, Ginger limped up to us, the huddled passengers, and pointed at me.

'You come,' and pointed at Bêbe, 'you too sergeant,' and to Mocz, 'you got your gun full, boy?' Mocz swallowed and nodded.

'Good, you get him,' and he pointed at party man (whose name was Erschrocken), who staggered, 'and I think, her,'

with another stab of his hand at a young woman (whose name was Beraubtes), who burst into tears.

'We go to meet someone else's maker.'

*This was regular rations*

The other passengers filed down to the soldiers waiting below and matter-of-factly handed in their guns to one who had produced an oily bag. I heard some murmured conversation as they went, and even a half-stifled giggle from one of the younger women. Ginger spat on the ground and said to himself,

'Chance gone for them, I think they happy with that,' but he said it in Blanklandic, so therefore being for the benefit of Mr Kite (me, if you don't get that allusion). Beraubtes and Erschrocken were standing together, Beraubtes holding on, crying, Erschrocken, with an arm around her. Mocz was looking sick, and Bêbe was lighting a cigarette with shaking hands. I was standing there like a long streak of piss, or a lemon, something yellow and surplus anyway.

Ginger smiled suddenly, and said, in a big voice:

'Come on then, happy band of comrades! Let's go and make peace.'

## *Unanswered questions*

What did Ginger say to Fusel that made him sit back and shut up?

What did I say to Fusel, and he to me, that I can't remember, even now, when he's gone?

Why was I thinking about all of this as we, the happy band of comrades, went in to Gethsemet?

I don't know.

And it smelt of rotten peaches inside the gatehouse. Although I think this may have been synaesthesia brought on by the sickly orange glow.

### *Sick and dazed, wandering through corridors in the bowels of Gethsemet*

We passed so many things I don't want to see again, with Ginger keeping up a tour-guide commentary in his peculiar idiom.

First it was the containment cells, with doors hanging off and the remains of things inside. Things half machine, half human, by the bones and gears mixed together. Shattered glass and dried something spilt on the floor. Bullet-holed skulls with nails sunk in and metal plates attached, wrapped with copper coils in rotting insulation.

'These are the failures, kept for experiments and observation,' said Ginger, 'they were made mindless by what was done to them, but they had reactions that could be measured, so the Imperial alchemists kept them.'

'They lived here, locked in these little rooms with numbers on the door. Until we found them, and shoot them in their heads.' Then, a hall with rusting giants hanging massive in the vaults. I felt their oppressive weight above me, and hunched my shoulders as we walked below.

'Things like these we fought in the valley,' said Ginger, gesturing up with his gun, 'they rend us to pieces with their



hands, and stamped us down with their feet. Until we realised they had to see out of their little glass heads,' and he pointed at a glint in the darkness above, 'there you see, there are proper eyes and brain behind that window. So we shot them there, and they stopped dead.'

I asked him if he meant that they had pilots, or drivers, or whatever they should be called, you know, like tanks.

I said, you mean they have men inside, controlling them?

'Yes, I suppose - bits of men anyway. This is the bottling room, yes? Where volunteers...' there he stopped for a moment. He took a deep breath and said,

'These volunteers, with limbs amputated, and brain hanging wires, were put in these machines.'

I asked him why, and he said,

'God is a machine that creates what it wants to eat. We can ask it why in very moment.'

Something scuttled in the dark.

*We didn't get all the rats*

'Is what your gun is for,' said Ginger, 'you think you see something move you shoot the rats fucking quick.'

'Rats?' asked Erschrocken. 'There can't be rats up here, there's nothing to eat.'

'These rats are mainly clockworks, don't need to eat so much for many years,' answered Ginger. 'Eat your shitting face off if you not careful, though. Keep them going another many years with fat communist inside them, ay?'

*Right, that's it*

All this scuttling around in arctic circle labyrinths, like an NPC from Castle Wolfenstein tires me. It's not fear, it's fucking exasperation. I could be in the sunshine somewhere on a sea-side packed with fat bastards reading a airport novel's latest grammar catastrophe (got a good plot, mind, if you like shit). Instead, I'm in the dark, in the cold, following a ginger psychopath through damp corridors with sweaty communist Erschrocken (who has swallowed enough of his fear to get inappropriately avuncular with Beraubtes), Mocz, the teenager with a big gun; and my hysterical valentine, Bêbe.

Holiday fun time.

*Can you hear that?*

'What?'

'Ticking.'

'No, cloth you put pillow in make no noise.'

'Very funny. No, twat, ticking, you know, clocks and shit.'

*Multiple death*

Erschrocken ran away and Mocz followed him, and we found them both later, cut in half and various essential bits missing.

### *Unwelcome revelation*

Sometime later, in the dim cold and orange glow, we were hiding in a wide lead-lined alcove set off the floor. We'd been running until we couldn't hear the metallic scraping of the rats behind us, then just stumbling on. We'd stopped for a minute, too exhausted to continue, when Beraubtes pointed to the dark hole half a man's height up the wall. So we climbed in. It went back a few yards, housing a mass of complicated pipes and dials in the back. There was enough room for us to get right in and hide.

Beraubtes crawled as far under the machinery as she could, and curled up shivering. Ginger sat down with a little huff, fished his little book out, and started flicking through the pages. I squatted. Bêbe slumped against the wall.

Bêbe was the first to speak; she said quietly, not looking at anyone, like she was talking to herself,

'Why did you kill the Albonian, sir?' Ginger looked straight at me,

'Because the lowland coward asked me to.'

That was enough, that was just about enough for me. So I hit him in the mouth as hard as I could, and as his head went back and I saw the surprise on his face (and was gratified by that), I hit him again. Then I was on top of him trying to break his skull by repeatedly slamming his head against the concrete floor, hoping each time to hear that hollow crunch that would tell me that I'd killed him (and the orange glow got brighter).

Then everything went white from one side, and with a ringing deafness.

I came to with Bêbe standing over me, the gun she'd just hit me with hanging in her hand.

'You can't kill the Commissar, he is the only one who knows the way out.' Ginger was sitting up, rubbing his head, blood trickling from his mouth and one ear.

'You feel better for that, shitting dickless foreigner?' The little fuck was smiling. 'I have hard head, and you are flower-waving piss-streak.'

### *Regaling into insignificance*

Instead, as it happened it unfurled in inevitable simplicity: we were lost, and I, your reliable narrator, now hangs a lampshade on my incomprehension. You have to imagine, because why else are you reading this, I certainly can't provide the details, I was there.

Bêbe is next to me, eyes shivering like an anime signal of fear and confusion; Ginger is next, muttering all the while. Beraubtes is a shadow ahead.

There was something I realised, but I've forgotten, or deleted, it now. We round another narrow corner.

'It has already happened,' Ginger tells me, 'the light is gone.'

### *The head sick feeling of being adrift*

In this inclement paradigm. I don't know the language, and even if I did, I don't know these people. Their memories don't coincide with mine; their affectations and shared reminiscences are to me, memes in Chinese.

### *The end*

Beraubtes got smaller as she went on, and found another hole that she crawled into: we heard a splash somewhere further down and not one of us would follow.

We left Ginger trying to gouge out the one glowing eye in a fifty foot high iron gargoyle we found half submerged in oil. I hope the fucker froze to death.

Later, guns spent, we (me and Bêbe) came out of a long tunnel to find ourselves looking down on dead people and a smashed tank - the lucky passengers who stayed behind, not so lucky. There had been a massacre, and in between the

bits of human scattered about were slightly moving machines.

We walked down the slope, stopping once to do a thing that needed doing (according to Bêbe), and found the tank train. The old woman was still there and welcomed us with tea in the candle-light.

We waited there until the cleaners arrived, hooked up and took us away.

(No questions answered)

That's it. Until part III.

### III

#### *The clarity of lying about what happened in the depths below Gethsemet*

Coming up for air out of the claustrophobic arctic border town where we decompressed in many relaxing sessions of interrogation.

#### *Aeroplane blues*

I miss Fusel, but Bêbe's still with me. We're waiting on the runway, stuffed into a Jet Air protoProp with 30 other nervous travellers

Me and Bêbe (Bêbe and I) will ride this silver riveted aeroplane to the dark grit of lush-jungle southern Toswania, where we are enjoined to take Fusel's heart in a jar for funerary arrangements arranged and willingly agreed.

I'm looking at the styrofoam stuffed protuberances of the interior of this particular aeroplane, and wondering why it's all yellow at the edges. Is it ammonia in the air-conditioning? Bêbe is non-committal.

#### *Into Toswania, wondering how white I am*

The Blankland (formerly Grand Britannia) thing with the word 'Indian' is all to do with it being a catch-all for not-black foreigners when we were being colonial slave trading bastards. (But we gave that up due to Mr. Wilbeforce who realised that all of that was just, you know, kind of murderously *evil*.)

So we had the West Indies (foreign islands jammed full of slaves), the East India Company (also Dutch in some weird

way I can't remember), India, the Red Indians, and the Orient.

We spread out left and right and called everyone Indians, had we gone north and south we'd be embarrassing ourselves referring to inuits as North Indians, and Chileans as Blue Indians. Polar opposites, but, in our confident and fucked up eugenic superiority, Indians nonetheless.

But the poles and interleaving hinterlands are all fucked up now with the gulf stream halt and the tectonic shift that rewrote the map. Svaltwoond borders Albonia in the north, and the great southern Albonian plains wrap dustily around the tip of Toswania.

### *Railway ghosts*

The part of Toswania where we debarked (in this continuing mission) is called Porto Macio Torneira, which, so I'm told, means port of dead hens, but the over-moustachioed customs guy had a shifty smile when he told me, so I think that's bollocks. Particularly as this city is completely land-locked, and surrounded by the kind of jungle lazy travel writers call impenetrable, and I will therefore call impenetrable.

The airport, on the outskirts, was once a major railway marshalling yard, and there are many abandoned diesel engines rusting in poisonous weeds - iron and vine islands in the flat acres of indifferently maintained concrete.

The air is close packed and humid, like breathing with a hot damp cloth held an inch from your face.

And it smells of pepper, rotting fruit and petrol fumes.

### *One of the things I get given at customs in Toswania*

A clockwork tagging device.

It's this ticker thing that is strapped to my ankle with a padlock, it keeps time with each stride, one tick on each left



foot down.

The number I'm allowed is calculated with a metal rule set in the concrete floor of the customs hut. I'm made to walk its length with two shabby uniformed, short-arse officers in attendance. They are surprised by my length of gait (I top most Toswanians by a head). They fit me with the device, and wind it with a key, after fiddling with the setting — I have to stand on one leg, hands on the shoulders of the man who locks the brass thing on. He tells me that, when I run out of ticks, the band around my ankle will grip tight and hobble me. So: I've been warned; so won't experiment with. But I think, perhaps I can surreptitiously hop now and then to get beyond my radius from the tourist quarter. Then I realise, if you want to mark out an intruder, get them to hop into your exclusion zone.

We go to a hotel what is good.

## *Slightly hungover*

Have a mission this hot morning. I have to find a fat taxi driver with the local tabloid held in his left hand (and I'm told I'll know him by the smell of rotten peaches). So I get out of the hotel (concrete blocks, beige, stained carpets and slowly rotating ceiling fans decapitating stupid wasps the size of my thumb) onto the street before, even at shit o'clock in the morning rammed with tinned-dinner carrying chaps fucking off to work, so I get the impression of lots of backs of heads and shoulders, sweat-stained singlets, and rotoring bikes.

So I breathe in (because the smog of petrol fumes and dew isn't mixed and descended yet) and take a minute on the threshold.

And there he is, a wide little man with the generic moustache, standing by his fucked up taxi, newspaper in hand (self-consciously) and looking up and down the loud road until he spots me.

I do that embarrassed grunt of recognition and start towards him. He catches my eye, and with some gesture I don't quite get, makes me understand I should walk on.

So I do, and know he's tracking me as I walk by, and with raised (fat, thick black) eyebrows, lets me know someone across the street is watching me.

*On the way to getting shot, accidentally*

When I get sidelined by the short taxi driver I'm in a bit of quandary: turn on my heel and go back in to the hotel, or walk up the road as if that's what I'd intended all along. I chose the latter with prickles up my spine, feeling the watcher's eyes on my back.

I walk for about a mile (still within my clockwork radius, so OK there) and taking in the business going on — mainly people shouting at other people about commerce in a language I don't understand, until I come across two stalled beam engines, on metal tracks, with smoking stacks, blocking the road. There's a crowd of people all shouting at the pilots, one thin and apologetic, the other ugly and aggressive.

There are automatons and bikes and smelly exhaust three-wheelers backed up. We're not getting past, but that's ok because I've reached my limit, and have no real choice but to turn back. I'm conscious that Bêbe's back at the hotel, glowering at the indecipherable tug-vision on the shitty little portable epoxied to the wall, that we can't turn off, because there's a Mercan dollar coin jammed in the slot, and she's waiting for me to come back, victorious from my expedition with the taxi man. Fat chance now.

The jar is in my manbag (yeah, it's Bêbe's handbag, and although no-nonsense Svalti utilitarian, is still a little little for me). The jar's not very heavy, but weighs a spiritual tonne. The name of its nasty contents, literally translated from Old Svaltish, is 'heart of dead comrade, in salt water', but no, it's not Fusel's heart, but something else Bêbe dug out of his corpse, on the way back down from the horrors of Gethsemet. I need to take it to a man in the Broken Quarter, which is outside my allotted range, but fat taxi man was supposed to be able to fix that. Fuck.

Anyway, I stand and watch for a bit, and then there's shooting, I think ugly has had enough, and he's shooting

into the crowd. I get hit. Next thing I'm in a very clean hospital with a very clean nurse plugging a hole in my side where I've been leaking out. I don't remember how I got here, and the nurse only speaks Toswanian, so I'm none the wiser when I pass out.

Next Bêbe comes to get me (there are uniformed men blurred behind her, I am having trouble focussing). We take a taxi back to the hotel. I recognise the driver.

Bêbe's not talking to me. And this fucking hurts (the hole, not that bitch's ignorance).

No, actually that hurts too.

### *On being shot*

Hurts like fuck, but not as much as a sprained ankle, so I was told by the doctor. Like that helps with a bit of metal in me.

### *I want to phone you, or contact you in some way*

Maybe say something loud enough so that it breaks out of this silent medium.

But I can't and I won't, because last time you looked at me you looked sick.

So that's why I'm here, in the hot room, hearing the ceiling fan loop round. Feeling the wet heat press in through the dark wood shutters. Whilst I curl around this hole in me, where the bullet was taken out.

Bêbe brings me tea sometimes, but does that fuck-face thing where I'm supposed to be guilty about being ill.

### *Many years in parallel, after the great divide*

That's when we are, the warming set in and reconfigured the geography. And one tectonic plate subducted another during the meanwhile. And that's why we have these fractured principalities: Svaltwoond, Merca, Toswania, Albonia, and redacted Blankland, and many others I will tell you about in next thrilling instalments. Sovietnam was the last big war, when the Mercans intervened, sitting back in their air-conditioned bunkers, directing friendly fire at all and, in particular, you, the subversive element.

## *Brothers*

Ginger (whose name is something I can't pronounce without spitting) did Fusel a favour.

And Bêbe tells me this whilst rubbing something stinging into my side where the tiny hole is puckered up. She also is dismissive:

'You flower-waving now, Blankland boy?' she asks, as she kneads her antiseptic fingers in (and I get hot-eyed, angry, gritting teeth to stop from crying out).

'The commissar was a braver man than you know,' she says, 'your Fusel took the easy road.'

## *Meeting with a winder*

I now realise that Torneira is a very dangerous place. Me getting shot is treated as an occupational hazard for pedestrians in this city. It's hot and humid most days, and the red-faced citizens have a reputation for angry disputation settled with the occasional (small calibre) bullet (big guns aren't allowed). I learn later that Ugly (the engine pilot) didn't kill anyone so he got a fine(!). Had he killed someone he would have had to pay the bereaved family part of his income for the rest of his life, which wouldn't have amounted to much, as revenge is fast food served hot here, vendetta burger with fries.

Whilst I was laid up, Bêbe considered buying me a gun from the little street vendor girl on the corner (her wares spread out on a tatty rug in front of her), but tells me she remembered my complete incompetence in Gethsemet, and thought better of it, and the pea-shooters you get round here are more for show. Thanks Bêbe.

So, it's with some trepidation that we venture out for the first time after my confinement. The hole in me is healed, but I reckon it would twinge a bit if it ever rained.

We're on our way to see a winder, Bêbe thinks she might be able to do something about the ticker tags that keep us in the tourist quarter, as fat taxi man is no use now; I don't know why, Bêbe says shut up when I ask.

The winders look after the clockwork engines that underpin the automated tiger economy in Torneira: they tend the automatons that lurch about on metal spider legs; they change the oil and tighten the mainsprings on these whirring machines that variously lift, or stamp, or build the concrete towers leaning over narrow streets.

The automatons are not all clockwork— their brains are actual spiders kept in little tins, legs tethered to tiny gears and armatures, that link to bigger gears and scrabbling legs, amplifying effort waldo-like. They are conditioned to perform with complex pleasure pain programmes fed in to their genetically altered mouth-parts as chemical dotted tape. Some are small (no bigger than my hand) and in swarms crawl over the faces of the towers, maintaining, dismantling or building in little bits. They come in all sizes up to some the size of buses, with mainspring housings humped over their back in fat thoraxes. All of them, from tiny skittering messengers on wire legs, to the big slow yellow-painted excavators, move in that disturbing spider way (dismembered hands) and all of them give me the creeps, as I'm an arachnophobe. Bêbe says not to mention this when we see the winder.

### *Bullets for Bêbe*

This is not good, or acceptable in any way.

It seems that I am fated (and that sounds shit) to lose those dearest to me.

I can't think about this now. It's all too much.

See, I'm just this observer, standing in the background when things happen. Wading through treacle trying to stop the slow-motion thing going on. But mainly ineffective.

We are at the winder's, and Bêbe is negotiating with this wizened old fuck in the corner of the corrugated iron shack we're in (surrounded by ticking half dismantled automata). And I'm back in the shadows looking on, when there's a burst of light and sound.

And the winder's dead, with her brains splattered up the wall and in the little alcove altar she had, with candles now put out.

And, and, and...

Well, I get out, by running full face into the back, and collapse through the sacking partition, tripping over, measuring my length in the mud outside. And then pull myself through the stinking open sewer, so, covered in shit, I get up quick and realise I made it out, and run like fuck.

Bêbe didn't.

*Can't*

Anyway. I'm hiding now, trying to get out of the sodium glare of the main road, but know I need to find somewhere to go.

I'm in an alley, where it's dark, and someone's blood is still warm on me. Where now? Suggestions welcome.

*I don't know*

I saw a little humming bird bullet crack up from Bêbe's skull, as her head went down. And I saw her eyes close as she went down. And that's all I have to go on. That last snapshot of her falling down.



## *Ghosts*

Why is that? What's that ticking? Are there rats there? Little clockwork fuckers, running up the walls. Scratching out the spiders from their tins.

Imagine that, you're wired down inside a Faraday cage, force fed a Turing tape of instructions in the nasty dark, and then the light come on from above, and the last thing you see is the happy eyes and teeth of that about to eat you.

I'm wired myself right now. I've been running and I'm out of breath and I have no instructions in my head. Every sweeping light angling past the end of streets this late night makes me duck and cover, protect and survive.

How will I get out of this fucking city now?

I still have the jar and the tightening ankle band restricting me to a radius. So if those uniformed assassins have half a brain, they know I've got nowhere to go, and they can quarter each road and avenue out of here.

So I double back, and go to the criminal scene.

It's burning now, and there are onlookers. So I mingle, not looking for canapés or the wine waiter, just wanting to be less tall, less foreign right now.

There are police there, and a big spider automaton standing over, and lit from underneath by, the burning wreck, pissing water into the fitful flames.

Now I want to kill someone.

## *Arrested*

And helping police with their enquiries.

I want the Blanklandic consulate to know, but there isn't one here. I'm on my own. In this windowless room, waiting for the inquisitor (which is not his job title, vocation or self-selected career, I think he just fell into it after showing promise pulling the legs off flies).

*You know you're not about to have tea and cakes*

When a guard brings a car battery into your cell, and the smiling shit inquisitor (with gravestone teeth) follows him in.

'Well, I see we have more questions to ask, and you have more answers to give.' Shit. Shit. Fuck and shit.

'My name is Herpic, and I am an ordained priest,' he says like too many times before, 'so I can comfort you spiritually, as I interrogate the sarx, and your soma is tested.'

He waits for the guard to put the battery down and then he says:

'Corporal, prepare our guest.' Which means getting strapped to the bed-frame and connected again.

This has been going on for some days now (it's difficult to tell how long, the light never goes off, and they do that sleep deprivation thing). So I'm weak and thin, and not now resisting.

So it comes as some surprise when I get up quick and stick my stiffened fingers in his eyes. And as he goes back, I scramble over and with clumsy panic luck elbow the corporal in the throat and I'm out in the corridor, and running.

They are slack and few here, the guard sitting reading Kafka at the end spends a moment being surprised before I'm on him and bite his fucking ear off and dig one hand in his face, and I take his gun and hit him with it too many times.

It's not long before he's not making noises anymore, so I go back and shoot the blinded inquisitor and the gurgling corporal (who's not doing well at breathing with a crushed larynx).

It is quiet for a while. After I've had some time, I find the way out into silent dark nowhere. Out on a dead-end street, at night.

*Ginger's journal*

I still have it. Taken from his twitching body as he died in the shadow of the fifty foot Hitler, and latterly from the pocket of eyeless inquisitor (that slime of aqueous humour still stinking on my fingers). And I looked in Ginger's eyes as he died, him holding his little knife in both shaking hands. Just need someone to translate.

*Feel like an RPG character*

In my inventory:

- Fusel's heart in a jar
- Ginger's journal
- Bêbe's conditional love
- A gun

And I have levelled up.

*Reminiscence: Fusel (white) to move*

...  
...  
...

*My hair has been falling out*

Which I think has something to do with the orange glow at Gethsemet.

My left little finger is numb and turning black, but that's because I think I broke it when I killed the Kafka guard.

So not well then. Also, running on sour adrenaline.

It's early grey dawn. And I'm out of my radius (one good thing at the Abu Gulag was that they removed the ankle ticker, so now I have the keys to this shit-hole city).

Going to sleep in this ditch I'm in. There's a corpse next to me, with a hole where one eye should be. I'm just about asleep when the call to prayer blares out of the PA strung up on every corner.

There's a small boy looking at me.

'Is that gun got bullets in it?' he asks in Blanklandic. And I realise I still have the gun (with dried blood and brain on it) from the Kafka guard.

'I don't know,' I say, 'why'd you ask?'

'If you shoot someone for me, I can help you.'

*'Are you my deus ex machina?'*

I ask the small boy, 'can I have some exposition now?'

*I follow the little boy*

And he helps me up out of the ditch. I'm feeling fairly sick. We're in the scrub beyond the ditch where the plastic wrapped lean-tos start. I stop for a minute, falling to my knees.

'I'm fucked, I'm completely fucked,' I say. The boy, who has been walking ahead, turns and says:

'you follow me, you be OK, you help me and I help you. You were with my father,' and he looks back at the ditch, where the one-eyed corpse is, 'you have gun.'

'Look' I say, 'I'm sick of this,' and pull Ginger's journal out and hold it out to him. He takes it as I say, 'I think it's in here, I think that's what I want to know.'

He flicks through the pages, concentration on his (—nine? ten...?— year old) face.

'This is Svalti, isn't it?' but he's not asking. 'I can read this for you.'

*Drinking tea from old tins*

You have to be careful not to catch your lip on the serrated bit.

It's now proper proper morning and I'm sitting in the plastic awning of small boy's pied-à-terre — a leaning

conglomeration of corrugated iron, builder's membrane, scaffold poles, branches and damp rugs, somewhere in the middle maze of Torneira's outskirts shanty town.

His mother is within, coughing in an incense heavy retreat curtained off from the main room. His father is dead in a ditch.

There's a copper kettle on a little fire, just away from a sideways box with a piss-poor collection of food-cartons in.

The boy, whose name is Menino, has been solicitous in tending to me (and making me feel like a stumbling giant, because he's tiny). He guided me with his little hand to sit by the fire, and put together some infusion that I'm now drinking (tastes like metal and toast, but is somehow satisfying).

It's a minute, or an hour, or a day, later, when I wake up.

### *I wake up*

And for a moment don't remember the shit that's going on.

So:

There's hot sunshine arrowing into every corner, making even the most nasty and fucked up detritus look limned in halo glow (mainly golden hour romantic). So I can, for a minute, think this is OK, this all right. But then the shine gets too actinic, and marks out every little nasty detail — the spent cartridges in the corner; the ripped packages of rations; the neglected toys in corners.

### *Reverie*

Where I am borne up on the tide of circumstance, like other scum (less dense than water, crap that would have made Archimedes leap out of his bath in a eureka moment because of the shit gushing from the overflow). No longer an observer, I now become an actor in this.

I have my inventory of devices, and I will click on every object in the 2D scene until I stop getting the 'You can't use that here' message.

*Menino tells a story*

'It wasn't always this way, *amigo branco grande*, my father, before he was shot in eye, and before we fled to this,' and he looks out the stringed awning, 'no, we had the good thing, with well-respected house, and goto servants, because my father was well-respected and *goto* scientist,

'He said some things this time that the manage didn't like, and asked questions that, also, they did not like. And he was advised by good friend, this man, Homemmau,—

'—but he was not good friend really, he was a fucker—' And I am momentarily shocked by this, small angel faced boy saying 'fucker.'

'I am now the man in this house, my father is shot dead six days ago by policemen, and I know only one who knows where we are, this shit Homemmau.

'This is who you shoot dead for me.'

*But I have my own story and I can't be in yours*

I say. Menino looks at me, and I see an infinite hole in his eye.

'It's all connected, *Branco*.'

### *Fractional decisions —*

— when added together make a whole one.

I've been in a daze since I escaped from the hole, and Menino has been good to me. When I woke up, he'd cleaned the blood and bits of skull and brain off the gun I stole, and laid it by my side. So when I woke up with a start, and gripped my hand tight and finding no metal there, it only took a moment to be reassured.

He says we should go to the *agora* soon, because he needs some stuff, and he feels safer if I'm there. This makes me feel good. But, I've come to a conclusion, I can't keep on having things decided for me — the incremental descent has to stop, and so I have to, at some point, think of a plan and act on it.

Or, fuck it, I'll just see what happens.

### *Ginger's journal contains a map*

So Menino tells me on the way to the *agora*.

Got to say, I'm circumspect about this particular expedition, I mean I stick out like a tall white man. Surely.

'No,' says Menino, 'lots of sex tourists in the *agora*.' I am both reassured and offended by this.

### *Shot the fucker through the eye*

Which, Menino tells me, has some kind of symmetry.

He dragged me into the *agora*, and I am still dazed and fairly blind, and pointed out a midget that he wanted me to kill. So I do it, because Menino has found a way of attracting this midget fucker up a toxic alley.

But I'm just lowering my smoking gun and, perhaps for the first time since the ditch, am focussing on what is ongoing in

the happening situation, and the midget clears to be another small boy.

That breaks me completely.

All quiet in the land of diskgrinder  
—*all quiet in the land of diskgrinder*  
you can hear the dogs barking in Albonia  
—*you can hear the dogs barking in Albonia*



## IV

### *dream-state Fusel reappearance*

Running on empty again — the nasty diet here in Toswania is not either nice nor sustaining — mainly carrots, cauliflower and peas in some fucked up yellow gravy, with rice, with fried flat bread. And it makes me shit through the eye of a needle. Eating from street-vendors, who tend big pans of slowly warmed *Escherichia Coli* (which I think means weird perspectives up your anus — *castrosphinctus*), which they will ladle into bread spoons you eat too, hot yellow mucus sauce dripping over your hands. That's not good, and given I'm still reeling from the serious psychoactives I was given as part of my re-alignment in the *stalag-ghraib*, I'm not so happy now. Staggering, actually. And still not over Menino's playground assassination contract.

### *Out*

Stowed away on a cargo train out of the city with Menino in attendance. It's the *quid pro quo*. I shot his bully, now he feels beholden to something I made him promise. Can't remember what it was. I'm just going to curl here in the back of this wagon, amongst the peeling plastic wrap and bits of discarded packaging, trying to predict the lurch in my stomach when we hit the points and skew of badly maintained rail so that I won't vomit peas and carrots.

### *Sponsorship and Exxon*

The problem is, and one that irks me as I stumble through this fucked up litany of misfortunes (that some monk is now illuminating in a limestone redoubt up some Toswanian

mountain, built above the jungle), is that I have a charitable concern that I am supposed to be expressing in every mile of my grand tour.

It's an issue, it's an action plan, that has been off-lined whilst I'm ill and injured in this asshole of a geography.

But at some point I have to call in (on the mobile phone I still have) and mark the miles at 50p per, so that dialysis machine gets bought by the Rhyll Friends Association (who do jam-drives otherwise). So all the old ladies back in the tiny oak-wrapped village will be severely disappointed by my inability to get beyond the shooting and blood thing going on.

*My end bone is dislocated from my start bone*

Went to Dr. Oesophagus with this complaint and he was no use, told me to get out of his brass and glass office in two small lickety splits and no mistake (fucker).

So I went to the homeopathic wino on East Street (the drunkard who subsists on tiny amounts of meths diluted in buckets of rain) and asked him if he could reconnect the start and end in my bone. He too fucked me off with dribbling accusations of time-wasting, that he had not heard, because no-one speaks at him no more, of this abreaction I am reporting.

So then I walked up St. Michael's Hill, hoping to see something complete and accurate reveal in steps above the horizon. Didn't happen. Instead I saw the demons laying waste to Cotham Brow (Bristol, UK).

So, still have no ligature binding the start to the end. Bones coming apart. Eventually found the cure, in the eighties bin of a record store.

*ReFusel*

He's not dead. I refuse to believe it as I wake up in a place I haven't woken up in before.

And where is my bitch valentine Bêbe? Drinking bitters in a gutter I hope (not with a hole in the head, on a cold slab, left behind in my journey, I hope).

*Rebarbative (rebarbaranne)*

Off the thrumming train now, somewhere flat, like the Fens, but dried yellow rather than muddy green - just deserts.

I'm standing on a wooden platform held off the ground by oily rope hanging from a massive rusting cantilever that looks like it was once meant to swing, steam-driven, from one track to another. But the other track is wiry weed grown, and I can see bugs the size of my hand scuttling through the scratchy bush.

Menino is pissed off for some reason, hot eyed in the sun. My headache is gone, and the sinus thing is receding. I still have the gun (clean now, but still feeling like a dirt radius in my pocket). I'm feeling taller too, less hunched and sick. Maybe I can work out the thing. Maybe Bêbe's somewhere I can get to.

But really, really, I don't think that's happening now (I'm rehearsing conversations with her that can now never happen: because if they did, well, that would make me psychic wouldn't it? So I try to stop picturing the reunion, because I know each picture won't happen. Fuck.)

Where are you? What's happening with you now? I'm in this land as flat as piss on a plate, with sand and sun and a little nastiness hiding behind everything. And you're not here.

...

### *Out in the sticks*

Literally it seems, we're walking through this forest of twenty foot high grey stick things. Apparently a kind of rooted animal (because you can see them moving and they have mouths in the leaf crown).

We're on our way to see someone who may have an answer, and something he's grown in a metal pot that, if I drink it, infused in bad wine, will either get me completely fucked or make me see expository visions. Castaneda would be envious I think - you get what you peyote for.

### *His name is Snart*

What's up with that? Here's me thinking there would be some harmonic alveopalatal fricative going on, and instead I get a name that sounds like the expectoration of a dolphin with a cold.

Anyway, Snart is this screwed up little man living in a hut made from bin liners and despair in the middle of the grey-stick-thing-forest. He wears a T-shirt with a geek message on it, stained trousers and a pair of big black spectacles (in which I see the glint of fire under the metal pot).

Turns out he's from Grutterland, and has that burr in his voice that makes him sound sarcastic at all times. Which me, being from a dimming empire of land-fill and office paper, find difficult to cope with.

More later, when I can get beyond my prejudices (and he smells).

### *Wooooo*

Snart gave me this thing I smoked. And lo it was good. Just realised the colour blue is synonym for the weak nuclear force. Fuck, I now have the Big Bang in my ear.

Can't hear too well, but am happy with neutron stars now (they have been woefully misunderstood - all that compression of matter to nano scales is just a cry for help).

*I think I just saw Bêbe*

I got out of the Snart hut, head reeling from pharmaceuticals, and five big green trucks barrelled through the sticks, breaking and splintering animal plants asunder, and in the lead truck, smiling until she caught my eye, I saw Bêbe - and then she looked sick. Then she turned to the driver.

Maybe it's just the drug spin I'm in. Maybe it's wishful fill meant. Maybe it's all of that.

Snart follows me out and says something. Menino is impatient.

*Following the beaten path*

It's easy to see, there's a swathe of destruction through the meat veldt where the trucks have gone through, and I can still hear the growling gears up, quite far, ahead.

Menino is falling behind because I'm running (blind from tears in my eyes, but blurred borders of not-destroyed stick-things keep me on target). Snart fell over on the threshold of his hut and didn't get up, because he's fucked.

It's gone quiet up ahead. I hope they've stopped.

*In the happenstance fighting descent (on a flat plain)*

Come across the leavings of orcs; half eaten things that looked human.

*Dietary concerns*

Recipe for a pointless excursion in the hills above the animal plain.

Didn't catch up with the green trucks, and probably hallucinated my Bêbe (see how possessive I get) due to mushroom-based dinner.

So I'm in a dog hut high up the side of a mountain in Unter-Toswania, the borderland beyond the last forts. The yak boy who spied me in his acre has been kind enough to let me shelter in the leanto where he keeps his dogs (I miss Steve). and I'll abide here until Menino catches up (I saw him, a distant speck between the standing stones in the valley, tracing my step on the steppes).

So, the food that yak boy brought out to me from his stone retreat: appears to be pounded bark of meat tree and flowers from mountain cacti, mixed in a clay pot, heated ferociously until the poison, and therefore taste, steams away; tastes like boiled A4 prints of corporate PDFs, downloaded from the About us section of an SME's website. Fills my tummy though. And the big dogs like it too.

### *Monkey bargain*

Yak boy tells me the locals have trouble with the baboons hereabouts: they are intelligent and philosophical; which fucks with the locals' parochial world-view (monkeys don't have souls) and they don't want to debate with anthropomorphics with big stinky arses.

I talked to a rheumy-eyed and grey-haired baboon (calling himself Gordon of the Matter Tree) who lives behind the big thumb rock lowering over the village (which Gordon sits on and shits from) and he said two things of note:

*I am older than you, yet only five man years, and grey now  
She's still in there, and alive, I can see it in your eyes*  
Bastard.

*Why don't I just die?*

And switch off this travelogue. It's getting tiresome now. From one pillock to another post. Every thing I see (including granite thrust up between bent trees in the slanting hill forest) is just one more snap vision landscape that has no room in my head.

I mean, for fuck's sake, I've seen baboons remonstrate, and clockwork spiders building spires (Nouveau not Deco). I've seen deserts carved from pumice, and small glitters of glass in dunes overhanging. I've seen vines strangle, and castles full of glowering vandals. I've see orange glows behind mechanically obsolete transport solutions — tanks pulling trains, and candles in epoxied lanterns.

And if that was not enough, I'm up a cold mountain, with the lemon-juice in the eye remembrance of lost companions. I made two friends (from the base clay) and didn't have the wherewithal to keep them close enough to shelter in my narrator's embrace. They strayed out of my authorial radius, and then went away.

Sorry, mushrooms kicking in in the gorse. Lying down in prickling things looking up at pin-bright stars, thinking back, and having regrets.

*she's back, so that's the end*

Hello Bêbe

*Bullet from the hill took my insides out*

I was in the long grass outside the main field. Breathing shallowly because the oxygen up here is metered out in small parcels. I'm not like the string and bones people round here, brown strips of skin stretched on tall bones, walking from one moss hut to another, stopping, then gossiping and drinking steaming pints of yogurt, fermented with tiny

mountain flowers (small blooms, white and close-fisted),  
talking shit and petty intrigue in a language I don't know.  
So I, gasping, stretched out under the bitter-yellow sun, on  
dark spinach green lawns, felt less than involved in the day-  
to-day; I am not interested in horses, or yaks.  
And then some fucker shot me; I saw the glint above me and  
beyond in the sharp geology piled up over there (higher),  
and then heard the swish of bullet and then the dull thunk  
as it hit. And then I'm wondering why that hurts so much.

*I see Bêbe in my delirium*

I'm dreaming, and I see her accept me back. There's a smile  
and some sunshine there. It's ineffably sad that this is just a  
dream - my brain, firing dopamine and serotonin in equal  
measure, trying, in sleep, to make me feel better. So I see  
her smiling, though she never did in real life. I see her  
saying things that are complimentary to me, though she  
never did.

And then I wake a little, and she's there (looking pissed off  
and impatient) over me, and she's saying this:

*Don't die, boy*

*Don't go away*

*Yet*

*We still have to find Fusel*

*Now I've found you*

I tell her I'm fine, so she sticks her index finger in the wound  
in my side and says:

'Not so fine.'

*If I get through this*

This nasty, rain-drizzling Sunday morning endless  
indifference. The grey hole that's below me but beckoning. If  
I get over that, then I will be stronger (because it didn't



destroy me). I need some Manga transformation, or at least to level up.

Looking forward to the wooden galleries of a Toswanian court with glowering turbanned fucknuts passing unpleasant judgement, on top of piled up religious books. Patterned textiles variously uncover the one true word and are accompanied by harmonium and tuneful wailing. They sing whilst they decide.

### *Just keeping keeping on*

There's no light at the end of the tunnel, just a series of dim glimmers in the alcoves where we crouch when the 125s go by.

### *Drinking myself to liver explosions*

It's the only way. I get shot twice, but don't die. I get electrocuted by fat twats who don't know the first thing about health and safety, and I bet there's not a qualified first-aider amongst them, and none of them can properly kill me. Even the asshole with the sniper rifle up the hill picks a kidney rather than my (still beating) heart; and shoots a strip off my inside under the eleventh rib and above my spleen.

That's all fine (and dandy) I'll just have to do it myself. I'll give in, up a hill, with my irritated lover in attendance.

### *Albanian air raid*

Ginger told me, in the long hours in the tank train before the orange destination, that in the Fraction War (where things were done by halves), the Zeppelins came over Shithaus and dropped fat bombs.

And after the blitz there was no communal spirit, no bleeding-eyed defiance, just a weary fuck-you from the

populace.

The big guns on the hill, where the capitol and secret police museum escaped unscathed from the fires below (to the harbour, in the streets) fell silent like a bunch of clichés — stopped choking out hot bullets into the sky, and mainly missing.

So the police went out in the morning and shot the wounded.

### *Did I tell you?*

That all through this I've been wearing a suit? I got it from Oxfam in the middle eighties, and therefore was once worn by a now dead guy, this suit he demobbed in, and wore threadbare to work for forty years later. It was clean and wool, and warm and cut in an indifferent way (single breasted, one vent up the back with a waist too high on the trousers, meant for braces, held up with a thin brown leather belt). And it's still holding up, dusty, tatty, fucked up like me.

### *Uneasy alliance*

The orcs further up the mountain, stinky though they are, and with questionable taste in biped meat, are friends of sorts with the village. Even the talking baboons have little to say against them. Especially when they come down at Solstice with big grins and lots of special beer (that they make from yak piss and gorse). They are happy fuckers, not a miserable bastard among them. A bit thick on normal measure, but sharper than most.

And they're not fucking elves, the landlords here, patrician twats on horses, all wispy and aristocratic, condescending and disdainful.

### *This is his head*

Says Nimtum, this orc in his cups, and he undoes his bag under the table and shows me this wide-eyed skull with rotting flesh hanging off.

'I saw he shoot you,' says Nimtum, 'so I crept up behind he and separated his neck.'

I am surprised and revolted, but because I am drunk and grateful (and have seen worse) just say:

'Thanks, man.'

Bêbe spits.

### *Mountain redoubt*

Up the hill above the village, before the wilderness where Orcs thrive, is a big stone castle (is there any other kind? Like if I said wood castle you would be surprised). It's black and glassy, but not obsidian, and has slit windows set back in deep holes. It's empty (kind of bereft) and has echoes in its winding corridors. Old weeds, dried in the wind, crackle and die in courtyards under crenelated shadows.

We spend some time here, me and Bêbe (Bêbe and I) sometimes come here as I recuperate (which is to do cuperating again). We bring cold tea to drink and pickled eggs and leaves to eat.

We don't, and won't, say much to each other. I'm still suspicious, and she's still closed. She's waiting for something, something I should say or do. I don't know what it is. And I'm not fucking trying hard in the discovery phase of this particular project.

Fusel is a shadow on us.

### *Can't*

That's what she is. Now I have found out what this all about. No, I will not be a part of this. Nimtum (blood around his lips) tells me to be not so angry, says I'd make a good Orc when fucked off, all angry eyes and spittle-flecked—  
'You got killer in you,' he says.  
But I love her, and will therefore hate her silently.

### *Time*

I still have the gun. Menino is somewhere in the village, now he's caught up. So, I will find him and ask him who he wants me to kill next.  
I hope that's enough to repair the friendship. Maybe not.

### *This is a down day*

So don't fucking talk to me Bêbe. I have nothing to say, and I'm off to practice shooting things in the castle. And Menino (who you obviously don't like) is coming with me.

# V

*And then I went home*

The end

*Got home today*

Nobody home, didn't think there would be.

After I got out of Toswania (curled up in the hollowed out hump of a dying camel) I took the Blue East route on a clipper. The crew were ok, except for the one-eyed guy with the lice. I got ashore on Port Mouth Sound, the incurrence for Blankland. The customs assholes were, well, assholes. But I expected that, and so made sure I was clean. I will now write a letter to Bêbe, and somehow explain how and why I fucked off so quickly.

But for now I will have a cup of tea and reflect on imaginary travels. There's a knock at the door just as the kettle whistles. I have that moment of indecision (like dogs wagging tails, who can't choose between equal enticements), and then decide (turn gas off, answer door). It's Fusel.

*Sitting in silence*

With only the tick of the electric clock above the mantelpiece marking time. Fusel and I are staring at each other across the dining table (dark brown, lustreless and marked with rings from cups and plates). He's not said anything of any significance yet (and I'm waiting for there to be some kind of significant thing that he should say, after all, I left him dead half way up a mountain in Albonia).

That's not to say I expect him to be forthcoming, he was always close-mouthed at the best of times (and there were

few of those).

I ask him if he wants a cup of tea, he grunts. So I go and do the crockery clacking in the kitchenette. Turn the gas back on under the kettle, take the foil cap off the milk, look for sugar in the cupboard above the sink.

'Bêbe sends her love,' he says. Which is right out character (for both of them).

### *Mellifluous confluence*

Means nothing; sounds good.

'When spiders pretend to be leaves, so they can catch flies. When the letter at the beginning is the first of the word that split the sky and spilt the milk.

'When things conspire, when help is at hand.' says Fusel. Which is no help. He's being gnomic (not gnomonic, he's not a shadow in the sun marking time, that's what my electric clock above the mantelpiece does). He's just being obscure for the sake of it, fucker. Maybe that's what ghosts do. Or oracles.

I tell him to drink his tea.

### *'And then I will stab you in the eye,'*

Says Fusel. Like I needed another right angle digression from the case in point.

I'm just having tea with a man I saw killed up a mountain with a bullet in the head, that made his mouth spout blood, and he's not even slightly ethereal. In fact, he's solid and in front of me, filling up the boundaries of his inhabited space with real three-dee thereness.

I ask him how he does that, the being there, drinking from a little cup, when he should be rotting (slowly) somewhere cold. He doesn't answer and instead does that (irritating) Fusel thing — a kind of peasant condescension, the disdain of the stupid for something not understood. Maybe it's just

me, but I think he is a fucking idiot, who can't stay long dead. So I ask him why he's doing the revenant thing. And that's when he says:

'And then I will stab you in the eye.' This is exasperating, it's meant to be (I think) both ominous and portentous (two words meaning the same thing, surely one should be in redundancy consultancy).

And he drinks his tea. At some point I think I will start shouting.

*Draining fuckery, makes me out of sorts*

In my brown study, with Fusel glaring, I have no real response. He's there, but shouldn't be.

I ask him how he's here, he says he's just here.

Let's go for a walk, I say. He agrees. So we're walking.

## *Unconscionable desires*

As we we walk (between the grey concrete dormitory tenements and gasometers lowering behind the slate roofs) I have this desire to hurt Fusel.

I don't know where it comes from, perhaps ignorance.

At last I turn to him (on a bridge over a derelict railway) and ask him what the fuck? He smiles for a pause (which just makes me want to hit him through his face even more). Eventually he says:

'There's nothing more, you just keep on keeping on. You just accept the series of disconnected events, one after the other, as they happen.' I am not satisfied with this, and ask him to explain.

'There is no explanation, no deeper levels in life. It's broken anyway. You just carry on doing what you do. And hope it's more than average.'

I ask about Bêbe.

'She loved you, but you fell down for her too many times.'

## *I'm going back to Albonia*

To find Bêbe.

*'you should be dead, you should be dead, you should be dead'*

I said a lot as I imagined stabbing Fusel. But it was only a walking dream. Like I would get spit between my teeth, and compress my lips, and stop me saying or doing that. Got a lot of anger there somehow.

## *Nox*

The new night-time character, who is mainly a prig. Occasionally has a kebab. Sometimes is cross-eyed with



drink. And is a nitrous oxide addict. She's a blast, in that roadside bomb sense.

Can't remember what the natural colour of her hair is, though I suspect it might be that drizzle brown rat type. She's small and thin, and tries to be cool but fails endearingly.

### *Taking the inner route out*

As there are now restrictions on our egress from these sceptred isles, and I have travelled to subprime sovereignties, I can't now travel freely (at least not where photographs stamped into hemp-covered booklets are concerned). So I'm out of Blankland on a tug.

### *Deleted dream scenes*

Discarded by the Imperials, banging and shouting in their containment cells either side as we went deeper in the corridors of Gethsemet. Ginger got scientific as he led us down into the bowels.

'These rooms are connected in to occult dimensions, they spiral out into cold universes, and the shitting Imperials channelled them here with one way valves, and put them in numbered cells. We are at one hundred and twelve,' and he gestured dismissively at an iron door as we passed by, where we heard infections.

'This is a small god, the god of charnel houses who sits between disease and accident, and sucks on bad luck. Soon we pass the gods with murderous intent. You close ears then.'

### *Another deleted dream scene*

Anyway, we have landed in the claustrophobic green jungle (cloying and too close, vines and insects in your face).

There are stepped up pyramids lurching out of the vegetable fold (ziggurats with dried blood down the steps) above my eye. In a different world, with broad leaves, pricking undergrowth and scaly animals warning-coloured...

### *Anthropophobic*

That's me. I just don't like people. I discovered this on the tug out of Blankland.

We were going up the main way through the skeletons of discarded power-stations adrift on the straits. The captain was up on the deck doing that windswept sou'wester thing in the pissing rain. Me and most of the others were down in the main cabin, the stove hot, mugs of tea, cigarettes and cards. I can't play cards, and I can't talk stupid, so I was a bit

out of sorts in the company. I noticed my accent subtly changing so I could better fit in. It got harsher, with more swearing. Good for me.

Tired of it pretty quickly, and told the big fat fuck under-captain that he was a big fat fuck. That didn't go down too well. There was a sticky silence. He'd got a reputation for being a bully, and I just pushed his fuck off button. Good for me.

'You want to say that again?' he said. I told him, no, I was OK with saying it once.

'So are you apologising?' I smiled, a bit strained, and told him no, and pointed out he's big, he's fat, and he's a fuck. Which makes him a big fat fuck.

### *Out to sea*

Looking out this grey day across the grey waves, I think I saw a whale-worm.

The detritus of a badly conceived solution to the box jellyfish conundrum (these plastic bag type stinging shits that can kill a dog, and make you sick as a sick thing, that washed up on the concrete sea-defences which pass as beaches on the seaward corners of glorious and orange-flaming Blankland - my nation, one nation under dog). The whale-worms were genetically engineered carnosaur, vast and hungry, that were meant to trawl the inner seas and eat the fuck out of these four-eyed, four-brained snot monsters with trailing fuck-you-up tentacles.

Well, it didn't work, they ate their fill and died with bellies inflated with tonnes of nasty little fucker jellyfish, and then died and sank. During the meanwhile, the jelly bastards got a species alert and produced acres of sperm and eggs in response. So that the seas heaved with jelly jizz and ova.

But every now and then you see a whale-worm break the waves, and hill up their massive bulks above the crashing.

One thing the sweaty scientists got right, with tubes and DNA refractors: these things are beautiful; and still sing long songs that echo in the deeps. Seeing one, a sad way away, is somehow heartening.

*Attacked by dogs*

Would that they were big black dogs that can eviscerate in one bite. But no, these are shit dogs, spaniels (ugly cats), that nip and yelp. And you can kick one or two off into broken-necked, eye-popped death, but the other little snappy fuckers will beset you. Biting with their tiny teeth, hardly raising a welt one and each, but still adding up to an exasperating finale where you just want to slam down the iron lid on all those little snarling fuckers - virus rats with big engaging eyes.

That is a metaphor for the thoughts I have as we get close to Sundetenland, our final port of call for the oily tug, where I will disembark and catch the land train to Svaltro.

*I'd like to*

*Push myself through the brick and plaster of the wall just there, in front of me*

*So that, just that, the things that are left, are the things that survive that*

*Teeth maybe, maybe sockets for my eyes, maybe bits of skull pushing through, maybe jaws, maybe teeth*

*And what's left will be enough to bite your fucking face off  
I'm coming, I'm coming for you, Bêbe*

*Man overboard*

Wiping knifed under-captain off my hands.

I was out in the dark at the front of the boat smoking a silkstring cigarette (I got a taste for them in Albania) when

the under-captain (whose name was Krasp) came up behind me and punched me in the kidney. I went down like a sack of shit and he kicked me hard.

'Who's a big fat fuck now you little cunt?' I wanted to say something clever but was too surprised and hurting so just said fuck off. He kicked me again. Bastard. Then he got his knife out. I saw it glint.

'I could stick you now, and fuck you off over the side. That'd be the end of you. Get up.'"And he pulled me to my feet, holding the knife close to me. 'I'm going to push this into if you make a noise.'

I still couldn't think of anything clever to say so I head-butted him full in the face. He went back flailing his knife, blood gushing out of his nose. I followed him inside his swing and hit him in the throat, one short jab, and brought my knee up quick into his balls.

Then it went into migraine mode, where the light comes on and things start looking sparky and grainy. I took his knife and, wrapping my arm around his head, my fingers pulling into his left eye, forced the knife between eyeball and nose until I felt the crackle grind of bone, and then pushed harder. He went limp. I took his weight and waltzed him round and over the side.

A little splash, small against the grumble of the engine and white sea noise. And then I see the little red glow of my dropped cigarette, so I pick it up and take one last drag before flicking it after the phosphorescent scumble, last sign of his passing, fast receding.

The migraine thing starts to go, and so I light another cigarette. Man overboard. I feel a tingle up the back of my neck and turn round. There's someone there, standing very still, breath held, looking at me.

*He makes to leave*

It's the cabin boy (or something, youngest anyway), he's like a rabbit in the headlights. And then he bolts. But I still have the knife and head him off.

There's a moment when I'm looking in his eyes when I realise I am about to cross a rubric's cube. If I stick him, then I'm on a journey that I can't backtrack. Then I realise, with a kind of lightness inside, that I started that particular track before.

I don't bother pushing him over the side when I'm done. I have to deal with the others, and get rid of this headache.

### *Boat drifts into harbour*

Everyone dead, variously staring, except me. I caught them all. Mainly whilst being incredulous that the blood hitting the ceiling was theirs and arterial.

I am tired because I've had to haul dead crew over the rail. Twelve of them. Each one in some different explanation of what it is to die violently.

But the problem is I don't know how to drive this boat as it heaves to the dock (quay? some fucking thing that gets destroyed, big splinters the width of your leg exploding up, because I don't know how to stop its progress). And it is basically halted by the granite side of the promenade that loops down from the hill of the little port we, all dead except me, enter.

I have fucked off long gone, dived into the black night-time waves five hundred yards out. I will swim to shore, and hopefully wash this blood and headache out. Salt cold sea will maybe make me feel better. At least clear the sparky fog from my head.

### *Sitting in a ditch*

Contemplating the end to which I've come. This was just supposed to be a holiday, a trip away from the grey,

drizzling headache I always got in the concrete walks and traps of that one place I lived in.

It was supposed to be mainly sunshine. Not a foot deep in shit in a ditch on the side of a road, avoiding the golightlies driving by with guns sticking out of half wound down windows. I haven't got my Toswanian pistol any more, so I can't shoot them. That pisses me off. So I'll just sit here a bit, and hope it doesn't get any colder tonight, it can't get wetter.

### *Growing tree*

All the branches separate but the twigs tangle. It's wet in this ditch, and the spiders aren't in tins.

I'll crawl out of here soon.

### *melancholera*

Which is what I might catch if I stay any longer in this damp ditch.

It's a disease of the heart. The shitty feeling I get when things become unrequited. Distressing and debilitating illness the symptoms of which include breakage and ache, which sounds like breakfast, as in 'I'll have a breakage and ache sandwich with ketchup and bastard.'

A good description of the way I am feeling, once (maybe twice). Highs and lows of anger and weak boredom— being pissed off with being pissed off, the kind of recursion that is doubly (triply, quadruply, quintuply, and so on) exasperating.

I don't know though — it hasn't destroyed me, so it must make me stronger, or more bitter, rather like the way I like my coffee. So now I'm a cup of coffee. Thanks.

*(In Farnak)*

### *Dampened enthusiasm*

The golightlies are gone now so I can get out of this ditch. I'm stiff and I ache, my suit is damp-stuck to me, and my shirt smells.

Off up the road, which is deep in gloom because of the high side hedges each side beyond each ditch left and right of me as I walk up the middle of the grit.

There's birds in the tree set back, and they are making a racket, which is called a dawn chorus, as the sun is just up (can't see it here in the narrow shadow). I need to get away and so I consider climbing the hedge so I can get over the fields, but that means crossing the fucking ditch and brambles. I do not like brambles, and there's nettles there too. Something about being wet and scratched is unappealing right now: oh, that's it, that's what's unappealing; the wetness and the scratches, and the stings. Maybe my suit will start steaming around midday, that'll be attractive. The idea of wading up to my neck into a clear river seems good (and washing out the dirt and stink), except I remember that rivers on the margin are usually deep in stinking mud.

I slow down a bit and wish for a warm bed, clean pyjamas and a cup of tea.

*hopefully you got the scansion*

Or not, who gives a fuck, you did or you didn't, you got the measure, or you broke your face on the ice as you arrived from geostationary orbit.

There are moons above, striped in red and orange, that whirl around the centre, which is made of close fistled diamonds and bucky-balls, where the gods are.

And I look up and wish I was better than I am, or, at least, to have a gun. Thank you lord.

*Minty breath, but dirty clothes*



Whilst walking up the road as things lightened, and the birds stopped shouting, I found some peppermint growing out of the cracked tarmac, so I took some and, putting it in my mouth, chewed it.

It was almost like cleaning my teeth. Still not quite right though, the headache is still in behind my eyebrows. Just makes me realise how hungry I am. And off over there (as the hedges diminish as I walk along, and I can see above the rise) is an Albanian tank, clockwork insides whirring, main gun black and steaming in the dawn-dew, dragging up the ground behind.

*(In Farnak)*

*Catch a glimpse in your blind spot*

I came into a small bombed out village where the walls of once-were-houses were little above head height and there was a man sitting in the shadow of one oily-bricked wall.

He saw me as I came around to his place in the ruins, and he smiled and said:

'Hello, I am pleased to see you upright when everyone else here is lying down, asleep I think.' I had seen some of these sleepers, some burnt, some with holes in them, all of them dead.

I asked him how long it was since the Albanians came.

'Is there still smoke?' The recent rain had damped that down, although there was still the smell of wet burnt wood.

'I can show you something,' he said and he pushed himself up. I noticed that his right leg was missing below the knee and there was a large dark stain under him. 'Here,' and he loosened one of the bricks in the wall, 'help me with this.'

I pulled the brick out of the wall revealing a dark hole, which shouldn't have been dark, because there was nothing on the other side except mud, blasted buildings and dead people.

'Look in there,' he said. So I did, there was nothing to see, just blackness. He took a length of card from his pocket and, with shaking hands, lined the gap with it.

'Now look,' he said. So I did. Still nothing. I told him that.

'Let me look then.' I moved out of his way, and he rested his forehead above the hole and shut his eyes.

'I can see how it was.' He slumped down after this. I think he'd died just then.

*(In Farnak)*

### *Snake house*

The continuing descent into senescence of our hero, the decentred self, as he becomes something or other, but with a plot. The story so far:

—Albonia sucks

—Fusel is dead but knot forgotten

—Bêbe is bereft

—This all a dream and can I wake up now?

—Trees have teeth

== From this imaginary travels

### *Fusel reappears*

He comes up out of this dark hole, where the light switch had been turned off. Its plastic surround scuffed and marked with many fucking fingers crawling all over it, so that the bulb was lit from within, in the vacuum therein.

And then there was a howling dark that was full of shadows inside it, but somehow became bigger, kind of expanded, the blackness leaking out.

That's what I saw. That's what I will remember. And if it's a dream, well then, that's good enough. I'll take that to be real memory. At least he's not dead there. Shit and fuck, can I not get out of these spider traps?

No, thought not. Ginger is still there.

*Back to Albonia*

Eventually

## VI

### *Continuing descent into splinters*

*Control the all consuming self  
Make brain-control slug beans, they are good to eat  
And then there's mad man dialectic here  
Kill, kill them all.  
With electricity kept in leyden jars. Or telsa coils.  
Hidden inside all human beings are dangerous ideals,  
repressed because the lizard brain spits venom in their  
eyes.  
And then there was the stabbing and shooting wars. Then  
there was the potential for the glowing and ashen wars,  
visited out of the sky with nuclear penises digging in the  
ground, and making mushroom orgasms above.  
Is it not obvious we can tunnel to the moon?  
Make an iron highway up through the stratosphere, ignoring  
or condescending to the high altitude balloons, red Apollo  
rockets and Leica dogs in spiky satellites.  
I have the information. Call me. I won't be in.  
I have to get to Albonia*

### *The salient mechanicals*

Time to dust this off  
I have seen brass, clockwork tanks running over the fields  
hereabouts in Albonia; that initial enthusiastic lurch over  
trench and mound before winding down, main gun oil  
vomiting one shell after another until the plastic belly is  
spent. And then they stop, guns wilting, until the infantry  
comes up behind and, in practised whirls, wind up the main

spring so the tank's wheels get whirring enthusiasm to overtop the next rise.

So destruction in front comes in waves, at running pace, as blue-uniformed, spike-helmeted, Albonian infantry run up behind, the salient mechanicals.

*Fusel's fucked off*

I lost him in the mall. We walked over the bridge into the rusty iron maw of East Village Kicker Emporium, the local commerce cancer in the middle of a winding of roads and motorways (we took the subway that smelled of piss and paper litter). And once past the destitute orcs ("will settle blood-feud for coin") and elf whores we were inside the heated interior. Big metal cabinets stood at every corner, each filled with heat bricks - because it's just this side of too cold for the clothes you chose. And he disappeared in the crowd. Leaving me again.

.

**end**

Continuing the story. Where was I? Oh yes, up a hill with spiders in tins and talking baboons. Just there. Right where I ought to be.

*Just nipped back to get my keys*

Before off on the holiday (long time gone, short time going). Anyway, before I bugger off. I found this from Bertrand Russell:

*Fear of public opinion, like every other form of fear, is oppressive and stunts growth. It is difficult to achieve any kind of greatness while a fear of this kind remains strong, and it is impossible to acquire that freedom of spirit in which true happiness consists, for it is essential to happiness that our way of living should spring from our own deep impulses and not from the accidental tastes and desires of those who happen to be our neighbours, or even our relations*

That's good.

<sup>1</sup> Not its real name, and not the one I gave it first.

<sup>2</sup> I'd link that if I could work out how to do it on my phone.

<sup>3</sup> Not his real name

<sup>4</sup> *Shlortsi* in the local language, so Fusel tells me.

<sup>5</sup> Not its real name.

<sup>6</sup> One's the client state of the other, but I don't know which.

<sup>7</sup> I fired this post up out of the chronology, sorry.

<sup>8</sup> That's the closest translation from the local dialect.

<sup>9</sup> Secretary after Slotpin finally died, choking on a chicken bone, with his aides too frightened to help or Heimlich.





ALBONIA